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The Merchant of Venice Vindicated

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Our view of Merchant results from a proper modern distress at anti-Semitism. But the play starts with a neurotic Christian, Antonio, seemingly having a nervous breakdown, at the broken line:

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself.

Antonio's ruinous sentimentality throughout the play is balanced by Shylock's offended propriety. Antonio is vicious and suicidal while Shylock is legalistically vengeful. Christian and Jew both seem unbalanced: their temperamental defects are complementary: Antonio invites the fate Shylock offers. Antonio offers his heart to everyone and Shylock ironically accepts it. But Antonio's friend Bassanio's courtship of Portia is what truly "cuts him to the heart." So the true "pound of flesh" is essentially an allegorical cutting to the heart, and only a momentary a melodramatic threat.

As for context: does Shakespeare show Venetian Jews unkindly? Another Jew, Tubal, behaves decorously, while Christian Portia ridicules every national temperament, and is also severe on Shylock. Shakespeare, like Ibsen, chooses plots provocatively:

which still passionately involves us. Jews historically fled to Venice because they were accepted there - like the philosopher Leone Ebreo - in a quarter as a "nation," like other foreign nationalities in European cities then, and in American ones now (cp. San Francisco's Japan-town, China-town). HMR